

It's the animals that really count

Michael Holman is bowled over by two luxury lodges in Africa catering to his every whim

A hot shower, a cold beer, and a loo that flushes.

That's my idea of luxury when I reach my destination at the end of a long and dusty day in the African bush.

If your idea of comfort under the same circumstances is a Jacuzzi on the pool deck, a splendid menu with fine wine, and an attentive butler, I know just the place for you: the Royal Malewane, in the heart of a private reserve embraced by South Africa's Kruger National Park.

If, however, you are prepared to rough it, and go without a Jacuzzi and a butler – although you will have your own swimming pool – then Leopard Hills in the same part of the world will probably suit you better, and cost you less.

You do not, of course, go to one of Africa's great game parks to sample the wine, excellent though it may be, and cheap though it is at 16 rand to the UK pound. At the end of the day, it is the animals that count, and I was bowled over.

Your sightings will depend on the skills of the tracker and the ranger who accompany you, and both lodges provide some of the best in the business. The tracker sits on a metal chair

attached to the front of the four-wheel drive, reading the information from the dusty path unfolding before him with the ease with which you and I read out the headlines of the daily paper to our breakfast partners.

The range offers an encyclopaedic knowledge of the animal and the terrain.

Having learnt more than I really needed to know, I watched rapt as a pair of lions mated, paying no attention to the vehicle and the headlights that illuminated their coupling.

I was close enough to hear flesh tearing as the animals tucked in

Elsewhere, a quartet of lions demolished a giraffe. I looked on as a leopard separated her trio of cubs, quarrelling over access to their mother's kill. I had been riveted by the sight of a cheetah, gorging on a freshly caught impala. I had been astonished to see a rhino and its calf emerge from the bush. Just minutes before I had seen an elephant stripping a tree of its bark.



Leopard Hills: a lodge with all mod cons out in the bush

All this from a distance of a few yards, sitting comfortably atop the open four-wheel-drive vehicle. I was close enough to hear the flesh tearing as the animals tucked in, the leopard cubs growling like angry kittens, the cheetah belching, the lions breaking wind.

I had gone on the game-spotting trips, part of the package provided by each lodge, feeling ever so slightly superior to my fellow spotters. After all, I was brought up in Zimbabwe... but if I set out as a sceptic I returned from the trips a believer.

But now for the more difficult part of the answer to the question: is it worth paying £300-£450 per person per

night? If you choose to stay at Royal Malewane, your every need is catered for, by excellent staff: you can sit in your Jacuzzi and watch the sun rise, go for a game ride, have a multi-course breakfast in the bush and return to keep an appointment with the in-house masseuse.

If you stay at Royal Malewane (where the number of guests is limited to 16) or at Leopard Hills (also limited to 16) the worst thing that can happen is to discover that your wine is corked.

There is none of the risk, that frisson of fear, that we old Africa hands relish; none of those uncertainties that give life on the continent its edge. There is no chance that your gin and tonic –

whether served during the break in your daytime excursions, or before dinner in the elegant dining room – will be without a slice of lemon, or ice.

The worst that can happen is the frustration of taking

ages to read your email, for the system can be painfully slow.

And this is where I part company with the modern definition of luxury.

Continued opposite

INFORMATION

■ Michael Holman was the guest of ITC Classics, Concorde House, Chester. Tel: 01244 355527, www.itcclassics.co.uk

■ He stayed at Royal Malewane +27 (0)15 793 0150 and Leopard Hills +27 (0)13 737 6626/7. He flew to South Africa on British Airways.

■ A one-week package at £2,987 a person includes: three nights at the Royal Malewane, full board, staying in one of the game lodges; game drives; and four nights at Leopard Hills on full board with game drives staying in a luxury suite.

■ This includes flights from London Heathrow to Johannesburg with internal flights up to Hoedspruit Airport and private vehicle transfer to Royal Malewane. It also includes a private charter to Leopard Hills.

■ A business class upgrade costs £1,784.

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